

# Challenges in establishing Equality among the Caste-ridden Indian Society

—A Special focus on the case study of Samathuvapuram in  
Inamkulathur Village—

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## Abstract

In the name of caste, there has been social discrimination against the people of low castes. In the traditional villages of India even today, the people of low castes live in areas located far from the rest of the castes, in inconvenient and insanitary locations of the villages. There is spatial inequality in the name of caste. There have been many efforts by the social reformers and governments of India to eradicate discrimination against people of low castes without success. However, the government of one of the Southern States of India, Tamil Nadu, introduced a Housing Scheme, namely 'A Model Village of Equality (Samathuvapuram)' in statewide 1997. The policy of the free housing scheme is to accommodate people of different castes in the Model Village of Equality. The inhabitants of the Model Village of Equality have to agree to non-indulgence in caste discrimination and promotion of harmonious living with the people of other castes. This research targeted one of the Model Villages of Equality, namely, Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram in the district of Trichy which is located 350 km from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. The aim of the research is to find out the influence and the impact of the 'Model of Village of Equality' on both beneficiaries and outsiders after the implementation of this housing scheme after two decades.

## Introduction

There has been discrimination and inequalities in the name of caste in the Indian social structure from the time immemorial. Caste discrimination has existed not only in the form of social hierarchy but also in the location of habitations. In rural areas, caste discrimination practices prevail visibly and invisibly in various forms. Habitation areas, roads, temples and burial grounds are some of the areas through which 'pure' and 'impure' are demarcated in the name of caste. Caste in the traditional villages determines the choice of location. Almost invariably, the habitation area of each caste is separated from that of the others by a greater or lesser distance based on the degree of purity of a particular caste. It is considered to be impure to have the people of lower castes living in the main residential area of villages. Hence, the people belonging to lower castes and people outside the caste system (so called untouchables),

are kept away from the mainstream of society denying them civic amenities and other services available to others. The settlement of the people of low castes is located invariably in the downstream of the villages, which is insanitary in many ways. Several social movements had attempted to eradicate these inequalities without much success. Neither the pre-colonial rulers nor the colonial administrators initiated any constructive attempts to eradicate these social inequalities, particularly in terms of their habitation.

Since Independence, both the union and state governments have initiated several measures to establish social equality among various social groups/communities. These measures can be classified into two broad categories — protective and promotional. Protective measures include several constitutional safeguards, acts and ordinances. Promotional measures consist of specific schemes and programs. Broadly speaking, the former is an indirect strategy and the latter a direct one. However, several studies have found that the protective and promotional measures had not produced the expected results, i.e., establishing equality among different social groups. Though individual social groups have attained development, differences/discrimination between the groups still persist on several grounds. A *Dalit*<sup>1</sup> settlement is a widely prevalent discriminatory practice in most of rural India. Several housing schemes for low caste people have improved their housing conditions but the problem of untouchability still persists.<sup>2</sup> Government programs and policies in general were not bold enough to address such discrimination directly by building the houses of low caste people in the midst of other dominant communities.

Post-colonial government policies have not encouraged integration of different caste settlements. On the contrary, they have encouraged segregation indirectly by passive silence about such inequalities. The government, of course, allotted lands and built 'cluster houses' or 'group houses' under various special schemes for the *Dalits* but all such efforts have changed only the nomenclature from *cherries* (slums) to colonies. They have not solved the spatial discrimination against the people of low castes. There was a demand by many social activists to build collective housing where people of different castes live together with the people of low castes. The model village of equality (Samathuvapuram), a housing scheme initiated by the Southern State of India by former Chief Minister Muthvel Karunanidhi, broke out of the rigid caste discrimination. People of lower castes, higher castes and those 'in between' were to live together in equal comfort, self-respect, and dignity with mutual respect and interaction.<sup>3</sup> Thus 'social equality', which is fundamental to establish equality in a caste-ridden society, could be attempted through the housing schemes. It is an initiative to establish social equality through spatial equality by the creation of model villages called Samathuvapuram (A model village of equality). I did my field research in one of the Samathuvapurams to find out the impact of this housing scheme and the analysis of this research is presented in this paper.

<sup>1</sup> It is a Sanskrit word used to denote a member of the lowest caste.

<sup>2</sup> Jothi Sivagnanam K. and Sivaraj M., "Tamil Nadu: Samathuvapuram: Towards Spatial Equality," *Munich Personal RePEc Archive, MPRA Paper* no. 3205 (21 May 2007), p. 3990, accessed January 18, 2019, <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/3205>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The first chapter deals with discrimination in the name of caste, and the second chapter takes up the concept of Samathuvapuram, and the third chapter on the analysis of field research in one of the Samathuvapurams in Tamil Nadu, namely, Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram.

## 1. Discrimination in the Name of Caste

### 1.1. The meaning and nuances of the term Caste

The caste system is a complex social phenomenon in India. The word caste is of Portuguese and Spanish origin: *casta*, meaning lineage or race. It is derived from the Latin word *castus* which means pure or chaste. This word was used in the sense of race by the Spaniards, and it was applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of the sixteenth century. They used this word to denote the Indian Institution, the caste system, as they thought such a system was intended to keep purity of blood.<sup>4</sup> Generally it is understood as “rooted in distant antiquity and dictates to every orthodox person the rules and restrictions of all social intercourse and occupation.”<sup>5</sup> Indian castes have a long history and deep repercussions.

The traditional understanding of the caste system is from the four *varnas*<sup>6</sup>: *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*. There are different terms for the people who are not recognized as belonging to these four groups. The people outside these varnas were called ‘Outcastes’ for a long time in history, and even now it is not uncommon in daily usage. The term ‘Untouchables’ was used because of religious and social reasons in Indian Society.<sup>7</sup> During the Simon Commission held in 1935, the word ‘Scheduled Castes’ was coined and used in the Government of India Act in section 309.<sup>8</sup> This term ‘Scheduled Castes’ is standardized in the Constitution of the Republic of India. The Constitution does not contain a definition of the term ‘Scheduled Castes’. The Indian Constitution empowers the President of India to include any caste, race or tribe among the Scheduled Castes, after consulting the head of the particular State:

The castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be the Scheduled Castes in relation to the State. (Article 341)

<sup>4</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1970), pp. 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> S. V. *Caste in The New Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>6</sup> *Varna*, according to Hindu scriptures, refers to the classification of people based on their qualities. The term is derived from the Sanskrit word, *vr*, which means “to describe,” “to classify” or “to cover.” Varna is classified into four types: *brahman*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*.

<sup>7</sup> G. S. Ghurye, “The Scheduled Castes,” Chapter XI in *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969), pp. 306–336.

<sup>8</sup> J. Kananail, *The Scheduled Castes and their Status in India* (New Delhi: ISI, 1986), p. 91.

## 1.2. Meaning and the Development of the term *Dalits*

Today, the word '*Dalit*' is used commonly to denote the people of lower castes. The term *Dalit* is derived from the Sanskrit root *dal* which means to crack, open, split, etc. When used as a noun or adjective it means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed, etc.<sup>9</sup> The present usage of the term *Dalit* goes back to the nineteenth century. Marathi Social reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) seems to have been the first to use the word *Dalit* in connection with caste in a term *dalitodhar* and described it as the upliftment of the oppressed.<sup>10</sup> It is Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) who coined the term *Dalit* to describe the oppressed and broken victims of the caste-ridden society.<sup>11</sup> But during the 1970s, the "*Dalit* Panther Movement" of Maharashtra gave additional meaning to the term "*Dalit*" as a constant reminder of the age-old oppression in the caste system, denoting both the state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed.<sup>12</sup> The word *Dalit* is also a Marathi word; its literary meaning is "those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way."<sup>13</sup> Thus, this term is expressive of their existence and experience and is an aggregate of all the outcasts.

There are many possible explanations for the origin of *Dalits*. The invasion of Aryans in India is one of the reasons for the caste system. The fair-skinned Aryans considered the natives as inferior. In order to preserve the Aryans' tribal identity, they have excluded the natives from their social customs and religious practices. It is also seen that the principle of status distinction seems to have affected every sub-group both among the Aryans and the non-Aryans. The *Sudras* (persons of low castes) who are relegated to the fourth and the last place also got sub-divided among themselves into 'clean' and 'unclean' *Sudras*. The 'clean' *Sudras* got assimilated into the Hindu social order while the 'unclean' ones were regarded as the *Pancamas* (those belonging to the fifth order).<sup>14</sup> Some of the popular theories on the origin of the *Dalits* are: (i) impure intermixture of the four *varnas*;<sup>15</sup> (ii) unclean and menial occupation<sup>16</sup> and (iii) the pure-impure principle.<sup>17</sup> A number of other theories have been put forward by scholars to explain the origin of the *Dalits*: social ostracism due to mixed marriage of different groups, subjugation after military defeat of the invaders, economic exploitation and religious sanction by the dominant castes, etc.<sup>18</sup> It is fairly certain that the origin of this group had an economic

<sup>9</sup> Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchables to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), p. 267.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> L. Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Press, 1991), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara R. Joshi, ed., "Dalit Panthers' Manifesto" in *Untouchables: Voice of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (New Delhi: Select Book Service Syndicate, 1986), pp. 141–147.

<sup>13</sup> E. Zelliot, *From Untouchables to Dalit: Essays on Ambedkar Movement*, p. 267.

<sup>14</sup> J. Kananail, *Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin* (New Delhi: ISI, 1986), pp. 3–6.

<sup>15</sup> *Manu X*, p. 10

<sup>16</sup> E. R. Leach, *Aspects of Caste in India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 1–10.

<sup>17</sup> L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 11

<sup>18</sup> J. Kananail, *Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin*, p. 7.

base, i.e., division of labour, and a definite function in society; later social and religious legitimization were given to them. But the fact is that the *Dalits* occupy the very lowest strata in the caste system. The *Dalits* account for 16.6 percent of the Indian Population (Census of India 2011) and they are not a homogeneous group. Nearly 80 percent of them are divided into more than 900 castes and are spread out in 600,000 villages in India.<sup>19</sup> They constitute different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. They have distinct occupational and regional characteristics.

### 1.3. The Caste System as a Vehicle of Exploitation

It is important to distinguish two elements in the caste system: caste as a form of group identity, and caste as a form of social oppression.<sup>20</sup> Basic forms of group identity, built on various factors such as ethnicity, religion, region and language, have existed in every society. But the caste system became an exploitative structure in which dominant castes possess the economic resources and political power, and this resulted in the hierarchy of the social order that was imposed on the population by a few powerful people. "Religion came in as a handy instrument to legitimize this exploitative system and to make others accept it without protest."<sup>21</sup> This became the basis for all social and cultural interaction in India. Those who were not able to compete with others in the society were relegated to the status of *Dalits*. It is this exploitative nature of the caste-based social order that has become a part of history. The hierarchical caste frame is not natural to the Indian mind.<sup>22</sup> It has been artificially created in order to control and exploit people. The dominant castes do not just exploit economically and politically, they exercise also a subtle ideological and cultural exploitation. The *Dalits* are not just at the lowest level in the caste system but throughout history they have been categorically discriminated against on the social level through the practice of untouchability. This practice has given rise to many social problems in Indian society.

### Untouchability

The notion of untouchability, which conveys a sense of defilement and pollution, is very much related to the caste system. It is mostly viewed from the principle of purity-pollution, and this principle may not be as old as the caste system. However, it can be seen that Manu in his law book (*Manusmṛiti*) codified and sanctioned it.<sup>23</sup> The pure-impure differentiation is made with the ritual relationship to the sacred. Those who are in contact with the sacred are to keep

<sup>19</sup> Bhagavan Das, "Untouchability, Scheduled Castes and Nation Building," in *Scheduled Castes and the Struggle against Inequality: Strategies to Empower the Marginalised* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983), p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> J. Kanaikil, "Caste Discrimination: A Challenge to the Christian Conscience in India", *VJTR* 46 (1982), p. 524.

<sup>21</sup> J. Kanaikil. "The Caste System: The Indian Name for Exploitation," in *Caste Culture in Indian Church: The Response of Church to the Problem of Caste within the Christian Community*, Sebastia L. Raj — G. F. Xavier Raj. ed. (New Delhi: ISI, 1993), p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who were they and Why they have become Untouchables?* (Jalandar: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1988), pp. 77–107.

themselves pure. The idea of sacredness and purity relates to person, place, festivals, time, etc.<sup>24</sup> Those who are opposite to sacred are impure. Ideas of purity, whether ceremonial or occupational, which are found in the genesis of caste, are the very soul of the idea and practice of untouchability.<sup>25</sup> At the religious level, the *Brahmins* claimed exclusive access to the divine. Their service in ritual became essential to society and thus they were considered as pure. But it had social consequences as they excluded themselves and considered the lowest group as impure. Later this principle turned into an ideology and a set of rules for praxis and shaped the characteristics of the caste system in the purview of religious sense with its social consequences as well. Ghurye says,

Before 800 BC we find the idea of ceremonial purity almost full-fledged and even operative in relation to not only the despised and degraded group of people called *Chandalas* but also the fourth order of society, the *Sudras*.<sup>26</sup>

Ideas of ceremonial purity were centred around the taboos in relation to food and drink. Manu says, "A *Chandala*<sup>27</sup>, a village pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman and a eunuch must not look at the Brahmanas while they eat."<sup>28</sup> This is not just a rule, but the degradation of *Chandala* to the level of a dog or a pig. Since they were 'outcastes,' there were many occupational restrictions. Dumont says that the religious division of labour goes hand in hand with the permanent attribution to certain other professions as having a level of impurity.<sup>29</sup> Mostly, the *Dalits* were barbers. They were seen as funeral priests and washermen of the soiled linen at the time of birth and menstruation, so they were burdened as specialists of impurity. But the attribution of impurity was related to a particular caste. As pure and impure concepts were imposed on the society, social life distinctions also grew. Two potent sources of impurity are related to the body: one arises from bodily wastes and emissions, and the other from death.<sup>30</sup> The *Dalits* were mainly doing jobs in relation to these, so they are regarded as untouchables because of their duties. Because of poverty, they ate leftover food, and this rendered them impure because of having come into contact with someone else's saliva. (Even today it is regarded as both defiling and degrading to eat food which has the saliva of another person. To charge someone with having eaten such food is indeed a serious insult). The *Dalits*, as impure servants, were made to live in the lowest social conditions. Ghurye summarizes the social conditions of the *Dalits* according to Manu:

<sup>24</sup> M. Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1973), pp. 73–79.

<sup>25</sup> G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969), p. 307.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>27</sup> *Chandala* is a Sanskrit word for someone who deals with disposal of corpses, and is a Hindu lower caste, traditionally considered to be untouchable.

<sup>28</sup> *Manu III*, p. 239.

<sup>29</sup> L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup> M. N. Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 18, no. 2 (November 1984), p. 161.

They had the residence outside the village, and the use of shrouds of corpses as their clothing, broken pots for meals, iron for ornaments and dogs and donkeys for their wealth. They were to be the hangmen who were to be prohibited entry into villages and towns during daytime, were to have been stamped with some marks and were to serve as the undertakers for the unclaimed corpses.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from not having any social intercourse with them, their touch, their breath, their sight, even their shadow was considered as pollution to the upper castes.<sup>32</sup> Because of this attribution of impurity to the *Dalits* they were banned from the temples, religious processions, schools, public wells, walking through Hindu streets, and also from obtaining the services of barbers and washermen. Contamination from food was considered most defiling.<sup>33</sup> Hence, people avoid eating together with *Dalits*. Intermarriage with the *Dalits* was unthinkable. Srinivas says,

The ideas of purity and impurity play a vital part not only in influencing the rank of a caste and in the pattern of its relation with other castes, but life-cycles crises and daily life. Also, on a long-term view it is seen that the linkage of purity-impurity ideology with the *jati* (caste) system influenced strongly the direction which cultural and social history took in South Asia.<sup>34</sup>

Objects are not polluted simply by contact, but when used by a person.<sup>35</sup> Although the rites of passage have impurity concepts, these are temporary, but the impurity of the *Dalits* is permanent due to their birth. Most of the castes are in the middle order: they can be pure or impure to the extent that they are close either to *Brahmins* or *Dalits*. It is important to note that the practice of untouchability was also not restricted to its ritual aspect (as when a woman is regarded to be unclean during her menstrual period), nor was it limited to individuals, but the whole *jati* is polluted.<sup>36</sup> It describes the complex and cruel and humiliating discriminatory practices, which may or may not include the prohibition of physical contact to the members of *Dalit* castes.

#### 1.4. Social Discrimination against *Dalits*

According to Prof. K. S. Chalam, "one can enumerate different categories of untouchability practiced among Hindus in India. They are broadly divided into (i) ritual and (ii) secular forms of untouchability. Ritual untouchability keeps each caste at a distance from another on the basis of their ritual ranks. It is purely based on birth and has been carried on as a traditional practice. This is found to be convenient for every caste at a distance from another on the basis

<sup>31</sup> G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, p. 311

<sup>32</sup> Bhagavan Das, "Untouchability, Scheduled Castes and Nation Building," p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> V. Devashayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>34</sup> M. N. Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," pp. 160–161.

<sup>35</sup> L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> P. S. Krishnan, "Untouchability and Atrocities in Social Action," *Indian Social Institute*, vol. 43 (1993), p. 416.



of their ritual ranks.<sup>37</sup> Since the *Dalits* depend for their livelihood on the employment by the people of higher castes, they fall victims to the discrimination by the people of higher castes. Secular forms of untouchability have no relation to rituals and Hindu religion. Progressive legislation and constitutional safeguards have done little to rid the social order of the widespread evil of caste discrimination.

#### Nature and Extent of Discrimination against *Dalits*

*Dalits* are discriminated by people of high caste in various ways:

- (1) *Dalits* are prohibited to enter into many temples and houses of high caste people mainly in rural areas.
- (2) Marriage processions through the public village road by *Dalits* are still not allowed.
- (3) *Dalits* are not allowed to use tube wells or taps in the villages, sometimes even the cities. There is no access to the public drinking water source. If the well or tap is located in the high-caste locality any attempt by the former untouchables invite objections and physical obstruction. *Dalits* experience difficulty and discrimination in obtaining water from high caste localities.
- (4) They are not allowed free access to the local village teashop. In urban areas the discrimination is much less.
- (5) With regard to the provision of essential services, the practice of untouchability still exists. Some of the *Dalits* are not able to receive the services of a barber and washerman in the villages in many parts of the country.
- (6) In public services like post-offices, health and education centres for example, the practice of untouchability is much less prevalent. But it still exists in many remote areas in the country.
- (7) In village community feasts and marriages between villages the former untouchables are not treated equally. The majority of *Dalits* face discrimination during village cultural events and festivals.
- (8) To a lesser extent, open or subtle untouchability is practised in meetings organized by village leaders.
- (9) The practice of untouchability has strikingly declined in occupational activities, i.e., in buying and selling commodities.
- (10) The extent of untouchability has remained almost intact in the sphere of house entry.<sup>38</sup>

The reason behind the caste discrimination is the belief in purity and pollution by the people of high caste. To come in contact with *Dalits* is to become polluted.

Although caste discrimination has declined both in rural and urban areas, the conditions of *Dalits* in rural areas are still miserable. A lot of steps has to be taken to protect the human

<sup>37</sup> Kothari and Rajini, "Rise of the *Dalits* and Renewed Debate on Caste", in Chatterjee, Partha (ed.), *State and Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 439.

<sup>38</sup> Sukhdeo Thorat, "Oppression and Denial: Dalit Discrimination in the 1990s", *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 9, 2002, p. 573.



rights of the *Dalit* community. It is the duty of the state and civil society, especially the educated people to strengthen the hands of those people who are fighting against caste-based discrimination. It is also the duty of all right-thinking people to mobilize public opinion against the inhuman and barbaric caste-based discrimination and strengthen and organize the various programs which will protect the rights of the weaker sections of the society in general and *Dalits* in particular. Dalits are not able to fight unitedly because they are also practicing untouchability among themselves. As American Scholar Stanley Wolpart has observed, "With more than 1,000 low castes, *Dalits* have found it impossible to unite themselves since they have lower and higher castes among themselves. Hence, there is discrimination among themselves. For example, *Mahar jati* of Maharashtra looked down upon "untouchable" *Chamars* (leather workers), and both groups looked down at "scavenger" *Bhangis*, almost as much as all three were despised by *Brahmans* (high caste)."<sup>39</sup> Thus, there is not only discrimination against *Dalits* by higher castes, but also among *Dalits* of different castes.

The practice of untouchability and discrimination continues against the people of lower castes. But it is not the same everywhere. In the urban areas, due to sanskritization,<sup>40</sup> westernization and modernization, the social practices are changing. Although there is an improvement in rural areas, untouchability remains. The idea of pure-impure is prevalent in any society, but as it is attributed to Dalits, it is social discrimination and an unjust institutionalized practice.

## 2. The Concept of Model Village of Equality (Samathuvapuram)

In the first chapter, a study has been made about the various far reaching effects of the caste system and discrimination against Dalits. This chapter traces the evolution of the concept of Samathuvapuram.

The Samathuvapuram housing scheme was introduced in 1997 by the Government of Tamil Nadu and it decided to establish 100 Samathuvapurams in different parts of Tamil Nadu. The plan was to create model villages in rural areas with free housing and other facilities wherein people of different castes and religions could live together and share civic amenities and services without caste discrimination or differential treatment. This scheme was named 'Periyar Ninaivu Samathuvapuram' (a model village of equality in memory of Periyar). Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker was a social revolutionary of the Dravidian Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Periyar opposed the existence and creation of '*cherries/slums*' and introduced the concept of Samathuvapuram. In order to eradicate caste discrimination and untouchability, he proposed several action plans, like inter-caste marriage, inter-dining and common dwelling.

<sup>39</sup> Stanley Wolpart, *Introduction to India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 1991), pp. 130-131.

<sup>40</sup> Sanskritization is a particular form of social change found in India. It denotes the process by which caste or tribes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes.

He also suggested that all communities should live together to fight against exploitation.<sup>41</sup> He wished that the separate dwellings of the upper caste people called *Agraharam* and that of the untouchables called *cherri*/slums should be eliminated.

The former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi, the direct disciple of Periyar, trained in Periyar's Self Respect Movement and was deeply committed to the progressive and reformist policies of Periyar. With a strong belief in the concept of equality and emancipation of the poor and the welfare of all, M. Karunanidhi developed the Samathuvapuram Scheme (Egalitarian Habitat or Equal Village). In commemoration of the Golden Jubilee Celebration of India's Independence in 1997, the then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi announced the housing scheme of Samathuvapuram in the state budget for 1997–98.

The term needs some clarification: It is a combination of two independent words: '*Samathuvam*', meaning 'equality' and '*puram*' meaning 'habitat'. The term '*Sama*' is a derivative of the Sanskrit word '*Sama*' — which meant equality in Hindustani and other Indian languages. The suffix '*puram*' is also a Sanskrit term. Perhaps of north Indian influence, the term is mentioned in Tamil literature and inscriptions denoting a 'town' or 'city'. Similarly, the word *samam* or *saman*, meaning equal or 'balancing' seems to be a Jain or Buddhist in its usage, perhaps a Prakrit word like *Samanar* (Jains) or *Sangam* (an assembly of learned men or an academy).<sup>42</sup> It may be presumed that these two terms '*Samathuvam*' and '*Puram*' appear to be Tamilized Pakrit words.<sup>43</sup> The word Samathuvapuram means 'Village of Equality'.

The Samathuvapuram Scheme launched by the former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi is the outcome of various schemes introduced by the early reformers. Today's Samathuvapuram is expected to pave the way for the birth of a new society without distinction of caste status and wealth. Even though there are earlier models, the present one is a government sponsored scheme intended to avoid caste conflicts and communal violence. Earlier housing schemes have been introduced for the *Dalits* by successive governments; but these are located far away from the main residential areas of higher castes. Of course, housing conditions of *Dalits* have improved but the problem of untouchability still persists. There is no spatial equality between people of lower castes and higher castes.

Earlier housing policies were implemented to promote only the economic well-being of the untouchables, ignoring their social and cultural needs. Various governments have allotted land or built "colonies or group houses" under various special schemes for the *Dalits*. However, all such schemes have changed only the nomenclature of the *Dalit* habitats from *cherries*/slums to 'colonies'. These colonies are still at the outskirts of the village without any free access to civic amenities available in the cities or towns.

Unlike the other housing schemes implemented by the government of India, the Samathuvapuram Scheme aims at developing a casteless society nurturing social and communal harmony. The houses have been allotted to all caste people side by side so that no

<sup>41</sup> Jothi Sivagnanam K. and Sivaraj M., "Tamil Nadu: Samathuvapuram: Towards Spatial Equality," p. 3991.

<sup>42</sup> Sethu Pillai, R. P. *Tamilagam Urum Perum* (TL) Chennai, 1987, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 395.

one row could be identified with caste names. The concept of Samathuvapuram is appreciated all over India. The Samathuvapuram scheme was initially implemented by the Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department and was subsequently handed over to the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department.<sup>44</sup> The first Samathuvapuram was inaugurated on August 17, 1998 in Melakottai village of Madurai District by then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. He stated at the inauguration, "My wish is that the entire district become a Samathuvapuram and not alone that, the entire state and, above all the entire nation and the world should become a Samathuvapuram".<sup>45</sup> He also said that he was pondering for a long time over the concept of Tamil people living together as a single community.<sup>46</sup> He also appealed to the people that people belonging to several religious sections of society should live in harmony minimizing all their differences.<sup>47</sup> It was to accomplish this idea that the scheme of Samathuvapuram gradually took shape. There was a ray of hope among the social reformers and activists that Samathuvapuram would make an impact on the caste-ridden society of India.

### Various Policies of Samathuvapuram

#### Selection of Site

The land for the construction of Samathuvapuram was selected as per the guidelines issued by the government.<sup>48</sup>

The guidelines are as follows:

- (1) It should be a rural site. The reason may be to avoid areas of caste consciousness. Caste conflicts have been perpetuated in villages due to the separation of the residential areas of different caste groups, particularly *Dalits*.
- (2) Water logged and low-lying areas are to be avoided.
- (3) Land should be appropriate and suitable for the construction of buildings. Priority should be given to create Samathuvapurams in vacant government lands. In case of non-availability of government lands, private lands may be acquired.
- (4) In the case of temple lands, necessary action is to be taken through the Board of Hindu Religions and Charitable Endowments.

#### Selection of Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries were selected on a voluntary basis.<sup>49</sup> Only those who have come forward voluntarily to live in the Samathuvapurams without showing any discrimination among the

<sup>44</sup> *Demi Official Letter*, Rural Development Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, December 10, 1997. (material gathered from government archives of Tamil Nadu)

<sup>45</sup> *Tamil Arasu* (Tl.), August 16–31, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Murasoli*, August 18, 1998, p. 3

<sup>47</sup> *The Hindu*, August 18, 1998, p. 5

<sup>48</sup> *Government Order No. 99*, Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, October 22, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> *Government Order No. 78*, Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, October 22, 1997.

people were selected.

### Method of Selection

Extensive advertisements were made in and around the villages within a circumference of 10 to 15 km from the area selected for the establishment of the Samathuvapuram through public announcements. More than 1000 applications were received by the officials at each Samathuvapuram. The scramble for becoming a resident of Samathuvapuram indicated the public support for the Scheme.<sup>50</sup> In the first phase, applications who fell below the poverty line were selected by the revenue officials. Though no income limit is prescribed,<sup>51</sup> priority was given mostly to the people living below the poverty line. Then the officials made enquiries directly based on the applications. After the verifications, the eligible applications were scrutinized. In the second phase, all the selected applicants were invited to participate in lottery selection of 100 beneficiaries. As per the guidelines issued by the government,<sup>52</sup> the selections were made by a committee headed by a number of officials and transparency was maintained in the selection of the beneficiaries. In selecting the beneficiaries, priority was given to freedom fighters' families, handicapped, abandoned women, and inter-caste couples. After the selection of 100 beneficiaries the houses were allotted in the following proportions. 40 houses to the people belonging to Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes, and 25 houses to the Most Backward Class, and 25 houses to Backward Class, and 10 houses to people of other castes. The ownership is given in the name of the female member of the family.<sup>53</sup> The intention is to empower women in society.

### Obligations of the Beneficiaries

As per the conditions put forward by the government,<sup>54</sup> the beneficiaries have taken a pledge to uphold the following resolutions and have undertaken to implement the following conditions:

- (1) I<sup>55</sup> and my family members who decide to reside in Samathuvapuram will live in peace, conserve harmony and unity without bias for any community or religion.
- (2) I, who intend to reside in Samathuvapuram, will perform my prayer in the community hall and I shall organize marriages and other functions or ceremonies in the community hall. I shall not resort to the formation of any independent prayer hall in a place meant

<sup>50</sup> Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Proceedings, April 15, 1997, *Dinamalar*, June 1, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> *Government Order No. 43*, Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, May 15, 1998.

<sup>52</sup> *Government Order No. 78*, Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, May 15, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Booklet issued by the District Authorities on the Day of the inauguration of Poigai Samathuvapuram, Vellore District, December 20, 1998

<sup>55</sup> Since the beneficiaries promise to keep up the resolutions by signing in the obligation paper and submit to the government officials, the first person is used.

for common prayer

- (3) If by any chance death occurs in my family, I shall bury or cremate the dead body in the common graveyard. I shall follow the guidelines of oneness in burial and cremation.
- (4) I shall not consent, attempt or permit installation of statues of any communal or religious leader.
- (5) I shall reside in the house allotted to me. Neither shall I lease out the premises nor will I create encumbrance on the premises.
- (6) I shall maintain hygienic conditions in Samathuvapuram without detriment to public health. I shall not venture to do any adverse act that causes hazard to public health.
- (7) I shall plant and grow at least two trees in the allotted place.
- (8) I shall not encroach into any vacant space left for public utility, nor will I allow anyone to encroach into a vacant site meant for public use.
- (9) I and the members of the family will utilize the public water taps, overhead water tank, fair price shop, television room, common library, roads, entrance arches and parks in a proper manner and we shall not cause any damage to them nor will I cause any complaint.
- (10) I shall utilize the common facility areas like public water tap, park, and television room without any bias towards any community or religion.
- (11) In the event of my violating the above conditions, I hereby give my consent to the State of Tamil Nadu to take over the land and any superstructure built therein. If I have made improvements in the area allotted to me at my own cost, I shall not call upon the state to reimburse the expenses incurred by me for making improvements in the space allotted to me.
- (12) I and the members of my family shall abide by the rules and regulations imposed by the State of Tamil Nadu or the district collector periodically.

#### Infrastructure provided in Samathuvapuram

The infrastructure provided in Samathuvapurams can be grouped into three categories such as 1). Basic Facilities 2). Community Development Programs and 3). Economic Upgrade Schemes. Besides Infrastructure programs, a good number of placards containing messages for inspiring communal harmony, humanity, elimination of untouchability, etc., have been installed at vantage points or on the front wall of the houses and compound walls.<sup>56</sup> Some of the thought-provoking messages in the placards or walls are as follows:

- (1) Let us preserve religious harmony
- (2) Let us eliminate untouchability
- (3) To attain equality, we should give up communalism and casteism
- (4) Let us develop humanity.
- (5) Let us eradicate alcoholism and take care of our families.
- (6) Untouchability is a sin

<sup>56</sup> *Government Order* 171, Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai, May 15, 1998.

(7) Samathuvapuram can remove casteism and so on.

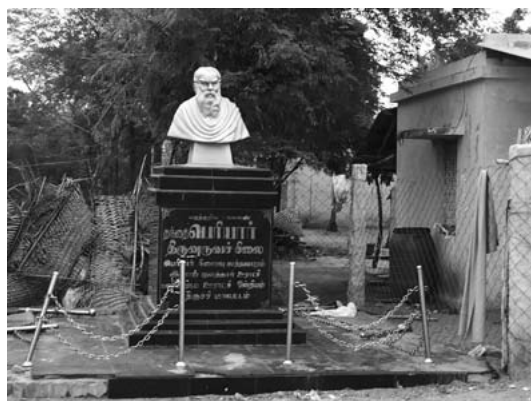
Initially the validity of the Samathuvapuram concept was challenged. However, the then government was strong enough to establish the model village housing scheme to eradicate caste-related problems. Indeed, the initial criticism disappeared gradually, and the scheme has come up with striking results. So far, about 150 Samathuvapurams have been created in several districts and about 15, 000 rural households have benefited. Though it may not be sufficient to meet the actual rural housing requirements in Tamil Nadu, as a concept the Samathuvapuram has received the total acceptance of the public. A field report observed that “the concept of peaceful co-existence, transcending caste and religious walls, as envisaged through the Tamil Nadu Government’s Samathuvapuram scheme is taking a concrete shape in the clash-torn southern districts of Tamil Nadu, despite its shortcomings and post-project bureaucratic apathy. The spirit behind the scheme has been well taken by the people who are slowly coming out of their caste cocoon.<sup>57</sup>” The report also brought out some of the shortcomings of the scheme at the implementation level, like quality of houses, misuses like subletting, and political interference in the identification of beneficiaries. However, these minor short-comings could be rectified through a complete evaluation and proper monitoring of the scheme. It has been appreciated as a remedy for caste-based discrimination and conflict.

### 3. An Analysis of the Present Situation in Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram

There are about 150 Model villages of Equality (Samathuvapuram) throughout Tamil Nadu. This research focuses on one of the Model Villages of Equality (Samathuvapuram), namely, Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram. This is located 327 km from Chennai, the Capital of Tamil Nadu, and 19 km from the District Capital, Trichy. This model village is named Inam Kulathur since it belongs to Inam Kulathur Panchayat (Village Council).



(The entrance of the Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram)



(The statue of social reformer Periyar at the entrance of the Village)

<sup>57</sup> S. Annamalai, ‘Samathuvapurams: Breaking Caste Cocoons’, *The Hindu*, December 10, 1999.



### 3.1. Infrastructure

There are 100 families belonging to different castes living in this village. Among them, 40 houses are allotted for SC/ST (Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe — people of low castes), 25 houses have been allotted to backward classes, and 25 to most backward classes and 10 to people of other communities. The site for the scheme was identified by the district collector either from available government lands or acquired from private parties. After a proper layout, a *patta* (title deed) was assigned to the beneficiaries, and sites/houses were allotted at random so that families from different communities live together as neighbors. A committee headed by the district revenue officer selected the beneficiaries in consultation with local bodies from nearby areas within a radius 10 km. Facilities provided for the Samathuvapuram include town buses from the city, with a stop over facility for all buses plying on the national highway. Post office and telephone facilities have also been set up, with 30 inhabitants being provided with milk cows. The district collector has obtained a written document/undertaking from each family not to install statues of religious or community leaders, not to sell or pledge houses for 15 years, not to create separate places of worship, not to consume liquor, not to let out the houses for rent, to accept using a common burial ground, to maintain hygiene and agree that the property will be taken over by the government if rules are violated.

The allotment of the houses is done in the name of a female member of the household. That is, the '*patta*' (title deed) is given in the name of the woman (such as the wife of the head of the household). This helps to promote the entitlement and empowerment of women. The Samathuvapuram consists of water tanks, community hall, primary school, library health center, fair price shop, noon meal center, recreation center, park and playground. The government also provides the deposit for electricity connection to each house. The entire construction work was handed over to the Tamil Nadu State Construction Corporation, with emphasis on the equality of construction. Expenditure towards basic infrastructure like roads, street lights, drainage and drinking water is provided by the respective departments and local bodies through convergence of ongoing programs.



(Main Street)





(The front of the Community Hall)



(Inside the Community Hall)



(The common water tank)



(The common water tap)



(The common fair price shop)





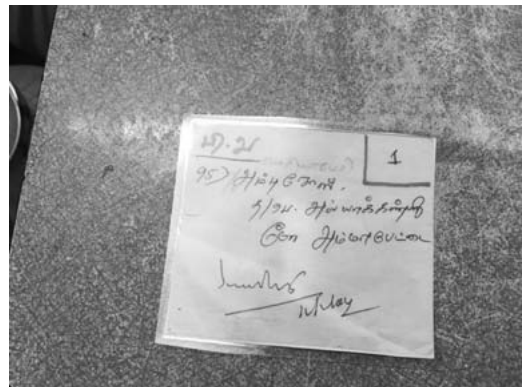
(Outside view of a house)



(Inside view of a house)



(Bed Room)



(Title Deed)

Interviews with the people of Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram revealed that they were unsatisfied with the maintenance of Samathuvapuram. They also blamed the present government for not giving importance to the maintenance and improvement of the facilities in the Samathuvapuram. As I went around the Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram, I observed that water tanks, community hall, primary school, library health center, fair price shop, noon meal center, recreation center, park and playground are poorly maintained. After visiting a few other Samathuvapurams around and reading various articles on the condition of other Samathuvapurams around Tamil Nadu, I learnt that almost all the Samathuvapurams are poorly maintained due to the disinterest of the present government run by the political party AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam — All India Dravidian Progressive Party) in the welfare of Samathuvapurams. The reason behind the disinterest of the present government in Samathuvapurams is that the Housing Scheme of Samathuvapurams is the project of the

former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi who belongs to the political party of DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam — Dravidian Progressive Party). The relationship between these two political parties AIADMK and DMK is of mutual contempt since their inception. The present government run by the AIADMK party does not want to promote the policies and housing schemes which were established during the tenure of DMK Party rule. Though both the parties have disregard and contempt among themselves, the government should take responsibility towards the maintenance and growth of all the good policies made by previous governments including the noble policy of the free housing scheme of Samathuvapuram which aims at harmonious living among the people of different castes. The government should also take into consideration the inconveniences and problems faced by the inhabitants of Samathuvapurams.

According to the agreements of the Beneficiaries of Samathuvapuram, they cannot lease out or sell out the houses that are given to them. However, there were a few houses which were sold out by the original beneficiaries of Samathuvapuram to others.



(Unmaintained road)



(Unmaintained common toilets)



(Incomplete water tank)



(Unmaintained fair price shop)

### 3.2. Spatial Equality in the Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram

In the rural areas, caste discrimination practices prevail visibly and invisibly in various forms. Caste in the traditional villages determines the choice of location for habitation and there is no spatial equality. The space of a village is demarcated in the name of caste as 'pure' and 'impure'. The habitation area of lower castes is separated from that of the higher castes. However, there is no spatial inequality in the Samathuvapuram as there is no demarcation of the location of the habitation according to the castes. People of all communities live together sharing the same residential area. They share all the civil and other infrastructure facilities in equal comfort and self-respect and dignity with mutual respect. In the Inam Kulathur Village, the people of different castes and creeds are using a common playground, water tank and multi-purpose hall. In this village, there are people not only of different castes but also people of different religions. During the interview, I learnt that the people of Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram invite other residents to and participate in various family functions such as marriages and funerals of different caste people. They show solidarity among themselves in the ups and downs of their lives irrespective of caste. A couple of years before, the people from low castes felt ashamed of revealing their caste to others. However, during my interview in this village, there were many who could openly say the name of their caste without being ashamed. This shows the confidence and self-respect that they gained through their life in Samathuvapuram. During the interview with the people of Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram, I learnt that the people of different castes used to celebrate together the national and cultural feasts such as Independence Day, Republic Day, Pongal (Harvest Festival), Diwali (Festival of Lights) and New Year. However, it seems that the number of common celebrations has become markedly less during the recent years. In the interview with the people of different castes in this village, I learnt that there have been no fights or clashes so far in the name of caste. But there are many instances of violence and clashes in the name of castes in the other rural villages of Tamil Nadu even now. In a way, the people of different castes have learnt to live together in the same residential area without demarcation of castes. As per my observation in this village, the reason to choose to live in the Samathuvapuram by beneficiaries is not to eradicate the caste discrimination nor live with the people of different castes harmoniously. Rather their reasons are economic. Since most of the beneficiaries are economically poor and most of them do not own their own private houses in their native villages, they chose to live in this Samathuvapuram for the benefits of free land and free constructed houses. Though they chose to live there for the economic benefits, however, their long stay with the people of different castes in the same residential area made them acknowledge the importance of spatial equality. There is no demarcation of pure and impure areas in the name of castes. They have learnt to share the space with the people of different castes and religions and learnt to accept and accommodate people of lower castes and other religions in their space. Directly or indirectly, it has made a great impact on the people from different castes who live outside Samathuvapuram directly or indirectly. The caste-ridden society is made to realize that the people of lower castes also could live amicably and harmoniously with the people of high castes. The social equality which is a fundamental purpose of this housing scheme in a way is realized. The people in the Samathuvapuram live in self-respect and mutual respect with each



other without any regard to caste or religion.



(Gods of different religions in the stickers. On the left: Hindu God, Middle and Right: Christian Gods)



(Grocery shop of a Hindu owner)



(Pictures of Gods of different religions inside)

### 3.3. Caste Consciousness among the Inhabitants of Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram

After the research and interviews with the people of different castes in this village, I realized that it is very difficult to establish a casteless society in India. However, the Samathuvapuram housing scheme somewhat has helped the people of different castes to share the same space and reduce spatial discrimination. On the other hand, it is unable to eradicate caste consciousness and subtle discrimination against people of lower castes completely. There were a few observations during my interview with the people that clarify the above statement.

Though the people of different castes live together, the cordial communication and collaboration takes place only with the people of the same caste. In the Inam Kulathur

Samathuvapuram, the Muslims have their own tuition center and the Christians, who are from lower castes, have their own worship place. There is still a kind of reservation among them to accept and mingle with the people of other castes. I could also observe that there is a subtle animosity and discomfort towards the people of other castes in the Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram.

In the caste-ridden society of India, inter-caste marriage is almost impossible. There are very few cases of inter-caste marriages that have taken place in the traditional villages and even the big cities of India without any problem. In particular, the inter-caste marriage between people of lower castes and higher castes is unimaginable. There have been many instances of 'honor killing' or 'honor crimes' if a person gets married with a person of lower castes. Though the model village of equality at Inam Kulathur was established 20 years before, there has not even been a single inter-caste marriage so far. This is a clear piece of evidence of caste consciousness among the people of Indian society. However, the invitations to and participation in each others for marriage functions is a great step forward towards the acceptance of other castes. It is not very common for upper castes to be invited to or participate in the marriage functions of lower caste people. I learnt from the interviews that the people in this village freely attend the funerals of other families and sympathize with the people of other castes even without any invitation. It is one of the good aspects of the Samathuvapuram at Inam Kulathur.

In the traditional villages of Tamil Nadu, there is a demarcation of 'pure' and 'impure' areas even in the graveyard. Each caste is allotted a separate place for the cremation or burial. It is not possible to bury or cremate a person in the place of other castes. Even in the graveyard, there is caste discrimination and spatial inequality. The people of lower castes are given an inconvenient place for cremation or burial in the traditional villages. However, according to the resolution of the beneficiaries of Samathuvapuram, if by any chance death occurs in a family, they should bury or cremate the dead body in the common graveyard. They are entitled to follow the guidelines of oneness of the Samathuvapuram. When I visited the graveyard of Inam Kulathur Samathuvapuram with some of the locals, I learnt that only the people of lower castes are buried or cremated there. The people of higher castes take the deceased of their family members to their native villages or towns and bury or cremate them in the graveyard of the people of the same castes or relatives. It is a surprise to learn that there is a severe caste discrimination even after the death of a person. During my interview with the people of higher castes, I learnt that the concept of 'pure' and 'impure' place is very important after death. In the Hindu Religion, they believe that there is rebirth after the death of a person. In order to have a good rebirth, there are various ceremonies of purification during the funerals. To be buried with the people of lower castes in the common graveyard is considered to be profanation of the dead person. They believe that the profanation of the dead persons would have an effect on the rebirth of the dead person. It is one of the reasons that they keep up the codes of purification during the burial or cremation of the members of the family. The second reason is to make a convenient atmosphere for the relatives of the dead person's families to attend the funeral. Almost all the relatives of the dead person belong to the same caste and they may feel uncomfortable to go to Samthuvapuram and participate in the funerals of the dead person since there are many people of lower castes in the Samathuvapuram.



(Common grave yard used only by the low castes in the Samathuvapuram)

## Conclusion

The concept of Samathuvapuram housing scheme was viewed suspiciously and had objections by many at the beginning of its establishment. However, the government was strong enough to establish the model village housing scheme to eradicate caste-related problems. However, the initial criticism disappeared gradually, and the scheme has come up with striking results. So far, about 150 Samathuvapurams have been created in several districts and about 15, 000 rural households have benefited. Though it may not be sufficient to meet the actual rural housing requirements in Tamil Nadu, as a concept the Samathuvapuram has received the total acceptance of the public and has made a great impact on the people of Tamil Nadu.

The different government housing schemes focused exclusively on the economic dimension not on social and spatial equality. However, the concept of Samathuvapuram is certainly a pioneering effort, not only in terms of promoting rural housing but also in establishing spatial equality, social harmony and social capital. However, it is unfortunate that the scheme has been relegated to the background because of the change of government in Tamil Nadu. Unless there is a change in the mindset of the political parties, attempts to eradicate social inequality would be in vain.

Samathuvapurams are not merely building the houses and allotting the same to the poor, but in addition they serve so many purposes and meet the needs of the people. Though building houses and providing infrastructure facilities seem to be a primary aspect, there is an underlying motive. The very fact that the people coming from different communities and different walks of life avail themselves of the Samathuvapurams indicates that the government has launched the program to create awareness among the people to put aside their communal feelings.

Since there are not many inter-caste marriages and not much free collaboration among the people of different castes in the Samathuvapuram, many consider the model village of equality housing scheme a failure. Nevertheless, a good number are of the opinion that the very fact of people living together and sharing common spaces without any regard to caste, creed and



religion, is itself a great step towards eradicating discrimination in the name of caste and establishing communal harmony among the people of different religions. In my opinion, though it may take many more years to establish harmony and equality among people of different castes, yet Samathuvapuram is a commendable initiative to create social equality among the people of different castes by establishing spatial equality.

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